

## The use of the victimisation survey and administrative data to examine crime under-reporting in South Africa

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### Abstract

*The ability for the law enforcement agencies to combat crime is dependent on the cultural belief and the way the community perceived such agencies. Crime has become a central topic for discussion in the recent years. The need to assess and evaluate crime demands data producing agencies to produce quality statistics. The lack of quality and reliable data always prohibit the intellect to understand our community better. The report will use the Victims of Crime Survey data and data from South African Police Services to better understand the predicament of crime in South Africa. Irrespective of the differences in measurement, time and space between the two data sources, the results shows a great magnitude of comparability over time. The victimization survey shows the dark figures not reported to the police, and the reasons for not reporting. A comparison between the actual levels of crime and perceptions about which crime commonly take place was revealed as housebreaking/burglary in 2011. Six out of 10 South African households perceived housebreaking/burglary to be the most common type of crime. It was experienced by at least by 5,4% of the households, but with about 60% of households reporting the incidents to the police. This suggests that public perceptions about the level of crime in South Africa are not far off the actuality. The under-reporting of some of the crimes incidents may be an indication of lack of public confidence in the police. The victimization survey results are significant when incorporated with the crime statistics obtained from administrative data in order to maximize our understanding of the extent of crime and the under-reporting of crime.*

**Key Words:** *Victimisation, crime, households*

### 1. Introduction

Crime is a multifaceted phenomenon that has become a central topic of discussion in the recent years. The need to assess and evaluate crime requires data producing agencies to produce quality statistics. The lack of quality and reliable data always prohibit the intellect to better understand crime affecting our community. The most challenging question we are facing today is how to effectively measure crime and its impact on citizens. Fighting crime effectively requires comprehensive statistics on patterns of crime and victimisation in South Africa. Historically, administrative data collected by the South African Police Service (SAPS) was used as the only source of crime statistics. However, questions about under-reporting, the quality of crime data and its credibility have always been a topic of public debate. Questions about quality of data lead to lack of trust in the statistics of the department. In recognition of the quality concerns of the various sectors of the public, SAPS management took the initiative to improve public trust in crime statistics by developing a strategy. Police administrative data continue to be a valuable source of statistics about criminal activity. This data generally relies on the extent to which the reporting of crimes takes place. Those incidents which are not reported by victims remain largely unknown and unrecorded. Police and court records allow for the monitoring of policing and of the criminal justice system. However, they do not necessarily give enough detail about crime from the point of view of the victims. One of the complementary sources to administrative records of crime statistics is household surveys that examine crime from the victim's point of view. South Africa conducted its first Victims of Crime Survey (VOCS) in 1998, followed by the surveys in 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2012. The survey is designed to measure incidence of crime, people's perceptions and experiences of crime, as well as their views regarding their access to and effectiveness of the police and criminal justice system. Households are also asked about community responses to crime.

A comprehensive and evidence based understanding of victimization will enable policy makers as well as those responsible for day to day policing to effectively find ways of informing the public on which measures to adopt that will decrease the likelihood of them being victimized. A robust statistical information base will also enable law

enforcement agencies such as the police to measure what extent their policing strategies are effective in reducing the incidents of crime, as well as public perception related to the risk of falling victim to criminal activities.

## **2. Limitations of victims of crime surveys and police recorded statistics**

Victimisation surveys in general are likely to produce higher crime estimates than police-recorded administrative data. This is due to the fact that many crimes are not reported to the police. Victimisation surveys deal with incidents which may not necessarily match the legal definition of crime. Although data from victimisation surveys are likely to bring out better discovery of criminal incidents than data from police records, they can also be subject to undercounting, as some victims may be reluctant to disclose information. According to the United Nations (2010), victimisation surveys cannot provide a definitive measure of the total number of illegal acts that occur in society due to certain methodological constraints. Victimisation surveys accept the respondent's view as to whether an incident was a crime and some crimes may not be captured where the respondent does not consider that they have been the victim of a crime. The accuracy of these statistics is also influenced by the ability of people to recall past victimisation incidents. The longer the elapsed time period, the less likely it is that an incident will be recalled accurately. Surveys are also subject to sampling and non-sampling errors. Administrative crime data also has limitations. One of the limitations of police statistics is that the data relies on the extent of crimes that are reported to the police. It is well known that a large proportion of crimes are not reported to the police. The practice is that police officers receive standard training in order to ensure that they report crime in a uniform way. However, according to Naude et al (2006:17), different police officers may interpret crime definitions differently. This shortcoming may distort crime data when a specific crime is wrongfully recorded in another category. In this way, some crime categories may be inflated, while others may be under-reported. Crimes that are not reported to the police are not counted. Only those crimes that are brought to police attention are investigated and recorded. The interpretation of the counting rules by police officers may be another source of error that can decrease or increase reported crimes.

## **3. Comparison of police-recorded data and victimisation surveys**

For any set of statistics to be meaningful, it is important to look at trends and make comparisons over time. When the data are not organised using consistent underlying principles, it can be difficult to make such comparisons. The VOCS determines the level of crime perpetrated against households in South Africa. The VOCS takes into account crimes that have not been reported to, or recorded by the police. VOCS is however, restricted to crimes against adult household members 16 years and above and it also does not cover all crime categories. The VOCS refers to crime that occurred in the past 12 calendar months, while the police crime statistics refers to crime that occurred from the April of the previous year to March of the current year. When the victimisation survey is compared to the police statistics, the victimisation survey tends to give more in-depth information on the risk profile of the victim (Centre for the Study of democracy, 2005). The VOCS measures prevalence and incidence rates of crime. As it has been indicated in the previous sections, the police data depends on the extent of the crimes which are reported or detected by the police action. Police data relies on administrative processes and legislative factors, which make it difficult to compare the two data sources in time and space. Police data does have insufficient information about the victim. Crime incidences which are not reported to the police will never be investigated and therefore would not be part of police recorded crime statistics. Victimisation surveys are limited by the fact that they are sample surveys which are subjected to sampling error. Survey results are subject to various methods of assessment of error, such as confidence limits, standard deviation, coefficient of variation, etc. The VOCS asks questions whether incidents were reported to the police. According to Flatley et al (2010) discrepancies between the trends in the victimisation surveys and police recorded crime statistics may reflect trends in reporting rates. They may also reflect changes in police priorities and recording practices, variations within the sample and differences in the time periods covered by the two sources. To increase the comparability of the crime types determined by the VOCS and police recorded crime statistics, a comparable subset of crimes has been created for incidents that are covered by both measures.

## **4. Crime trends: Police records and victimisation survey analysed**

### **4.1 Incidents of crime**

Crime is a naturally difficult phenomenon to measure. Some crimes go under-reported, while others are over-reported. Neither the victimisation survey results nor the police crime statistics can produce a count of total crime (National Statistician, 2011). The prevalence of various crimes is evaluated through the respondents' experience of

the different categories of crime. According to Witterbrood and Junger (2002), surveys reveal the level and other aspects of crime, over and above what is provided by the police records. These include opinions about the police, courts, the fear of crime and how communities respond to crime. A comparison between the actual levels of crime and perceptions about which crime commonly take place was revealed as housebreaking/burglary in 2011. Six out of 10 South African households perceived housebreaking/burglary to be the most common type of crime. It was experienced by at least by 5,4% of the households, but with about 60% of households reporting the incidents to the police. This suggests that public perceptions about the level of crime in South Africa are not far off the actuality. Table 1 below shows the extent and level of crimes as reported by the VOCS and SAPS over the period 2010 to 2012. The table also presents the confidence limits as obtained from the VOCS 2011 estimates.

**Table 1: Comparable subset of crimes for VOCS 2011 and SAPS 2011/2012 estimates**

Types of crime	VOCS 2011	SAPS 2011/2012	VOCS 2011 Under-reporting rate	SAPS 2011/2012 adjusted	VOCS 2011 95% Confidence Limits	
					LL	UL
Robbery	249	154	66,9	321	204	294
Car hijacking	35	10	20,2	17	16	53
Assault	451	37	50,6	265	388	516
Sexual offences	32	58	73,7	82	15	49
Deliberate damage of dwellings	47	129	37,4	146	34	59
Home robbery	200	17	38,6	94	175	224
Theft of car	63	59	7,8	64	48	77
Housebreaking/burglary	730	246	41,5	549	684	776
Stock theft	178	31	59,9	138	157	198
Murder	16	16	1,8	16	9	23
Theft out of motor vehicle	162	130	43,5	200	140	184

Table 1 above presents the 95% confidence interval of a population parameter which should be interpreted as the success rate of the calculated confidence interval, to include or to contain the value of the population parameter. VOCS 2011 estimates for various crimes listed in Table 1 are contained within confidence limits. Murder and theft of cars were the only crimes recorded by SAPS during 2011/2012 which were within the confidence limits of VOCS 2011. Crimes such as robbery, carjacking, assault, home robbery, housebreaking/burglary, stock theft and theft out of motor vehicles provide lower estimates when compared to VOCS 2011. These crimes recorded estimates that were below the lower bound of VOCS 2011 confidence limits. In 2011, sexual offences and deliberate damage of dwellings were significantly lower in VOCS as compared to SAPS 2011/2012. To account for those crimes that were significantly different between the two data sources and under-reporting, adjustment was done on SAPS figures as to illustrate the difference using the following derived formula:

$Y + (X * R)$  Where  $X$  = number of crimes incidents experienced in VOCS 2011

$R$  = proportion of crime incidents experienced in VOCS 2011, but not reported to the police

$Y$  = Number of recorded cases by SAPS in 2011/2012.

The adjusted figures showed significant improvement of SAPS figures. This adjustment assumes that all cases in VOCS 2011 were reported to the police. The gap between adjusted SAPS figures and VOCS has been reduced, but figures are still not significant. This is due to the seriousness of the crime. After adjustment of SAPS figures, car hijacking was significant within the boundaries of VOCS. Other crimes such as assault, home robbery, housebreaking/burglary, deliberate damage of property and stock theft remained significantly lower. This implies that there is still a lot of improvement to be made to ensure that the results of VOCS and police recorded data are coherent and are able to better reflect crime trends. The magnitude of unreported crime requires that the public be given regular information on estimated underreporting rates and that the public should be trained on the importance of reporting crime incidents to the police.

Table 2 represents reporting rates for contact related crimes as reported by VOCS 2011 and Table 3 depicts reporting rates for property related crimes. The reasons for not reporting crimes differed according to type of crime. The majority of people who did not report home robbery thought police could not do anything. However 9,7% said they solved it themselves while 4,8% indicated that they preferred other authority. About 32,4% of victims of sexual offences indicated their main reason for not reporting this type of crime is because the police could do nothing about it. Among car hijacking victims, 53,2% indicated that they would rather report crime to other authorities, while 34,5% believed police could do nothing. However this is not the case for non-reporting by assault victims who believed that the assault was not serious enough (12,2%), whereas 21,5% solved the crime themselves. This pattern can also be traced to the victims of robbery who also believe that police could do nothing and won't do anything. Other reasons that were cited, particularly relating to property crime, were that the matter was not serious enough. According to Antanopoulos (2004), incidents like theft and vandalism generally appear significant in terms of personal victimisation, but may be trivial in terms of the financial impact on the victim.

**Table 2: VOCS 2011 reporting rates for contact crime**

Contact related crime	Home robbery	Assault	Car hijacking	Robbery	Sexual offences
<b>Reporting rate</b>	61,4	49,4	79,8	33,1	94,2
<b>Reason for not reporting</b>					
Not serious enough	13,9	12,2	0	23,1	0
Solved it myself	9,7	21,5	0	12,1	0
Other authority	4,8	6,2	53,2	0	0
Police could do nothing	28,9	13,6	34,5	30,3	32,4
Police won't do anything	16,5	9,3	0	21,7	0
Other reasons	23,3	34,6	12,2	11,6	0

**Table 3: VOCS 2011 reporting rates for property crime**

Property related crimes	Car theft	House-breaking/ burglary	Stock theft	Theft from car	Deliberate damaging of dwelling	Motor vehicle vandalism
<b>Reporting rate</b>	92,2	58,5	40,1	56,5	62,6	40,8
<b>Reason for not reporting</b>						
Not serious enough	11,2	11,5	9,3	19,7	32,9	23,4
Solved it myself	16,4	10,1	8,3	7,3	18,9	1,4
Other authority	0	5,5	18,9	1,2	10	5,6
Police could do nothing	0	28	20,3	24,9	14	20,2
Police won't do anything	29,9	20	15,2	28,9	14,7	24,5
Other reasons	42,5	25	28,1	18	9,6	24,9

## 4.2 Contact and property related crimes

Violent or contact crime is often viewed as a serious social problem (Witterbrood and Junger, 2002). Contact crimes have always led to public concern and it is highest on the political agenda of the country. This refers to the deliberate use of violence; including the violation of the physical integrity of a person. According to SAPS Annual Report 2011/2012, seven categories of serious crimes are grouped together as contact crime or violent crime against a person. In this report, we will analyse murder, sexual offences, assault with the intent to inflict grievous bodily harm, common assault, aggravated robbery and common robbery. These crimes involve physical contact between the perpetrators and their victims. Contact related crime also covers arson and malicious damage to

property. Property related crimes in this report include housebreaking/burglary at residential places, theft of motor vehicles and motor cycles, theft out of motor vehicles and stock theft. These crimes, including theft out of motor vehicle, occur in the absence of the victims and involve no violence except damage to property.

These crimes have increased over the years, with different rates across provinces depending on whether we look at incidents as reported by the victimisation survey or police recorded statistics. The results shown in Figure 1 below indicate that contact related crime, as reported by police are not at the same level as the victimisation results, except in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Free State provinces. Provinces experiencing high levels of contact related crimes were Gauteng, the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. If we take into consideration the reporting rate, as reported by the VOCS, the differences between the two sources become smaller. The two sources however depict similar trends. Figure 2 shows the trend of property crime as reported by VOCS and the police recorded statistics. The trend is almost the same as that of the contact crimes. Housebreaking/burglary was the main contributor for the overall property related crimes in 2011/2012 as reported by both VOCS and SAPS crime statistics. Provinces which contributed to upward increasing trends were Gauteng, the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. These are provinces with metropolitan cities. The provinces with the least occurrences of property related crime were Northern Cape, Free State and North West province.

### Selected contact crime for VOCS and police recorded statistics: 2011–2012

Figure 1

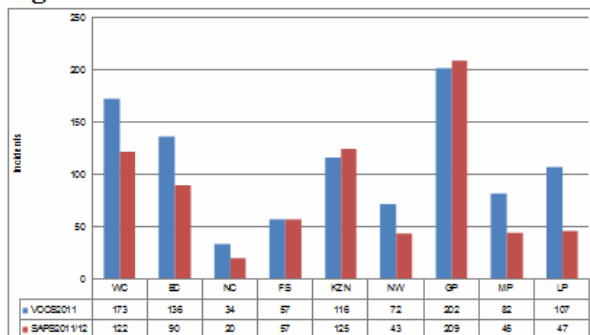
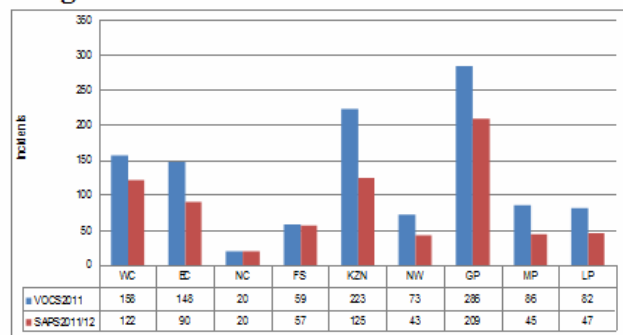


Figure 2



## 5 Recommendations

Each data source has its share of strengths and limitations. In order to assess crime trends, both police recorded statistics and the victimisation survey data are essential. Given the importance of the issue in South Africa, Stats SA should continue to undertake regular crime surveys. The continued measurement of crime can contribute towards identifying and further exploring specific trends of crime and the social dynamics in which they manifest. The behaviour and attitudes of respondents pertaining to the perceived seriousness of the victimisation, the reporting of criminal victimisation, as well as the reasons that discouraged victims from reporting, should receive attention. This report further recommends that these outcomes could contribute towards identifying the possible root causes of crime and that police should work with other role players collectively to fight crime. One way to achieve this is when all stakeholders within the safety and security cluster come together to develop harmonised methods and guidelines on how to collect and report on crime statistics. This can be the start of a debate on whether crime data reflects reality, on the alternative sources of information, as well as the real level of crime in South Africa. Victim surveys have advantages in uncovering a range of crimes that are not well reported to or recorded by the police, as well as other information on the nature of these crimes and respondents' views. Police statistics provide important information on the activity and attention of the criminal justice system as well as providing information on more serious and other types of crime that cannot be measured using surveys of the general public. Discrepancies between the two sources of data may affect any assessments of crime trends, and weaken policy and strategy formulation and review. The report recommends that factors associated with an increase of any type of crime should be investigated, taking into account the demographic and socio-economic changes as well as the actions of the police and judiciary. The issue of data discrepancies between victimisation survey results and police recorded statistics make it necessary to compare the results. Finally, this report recommends that a strategy should be developed by different role players in the safety and security cluster to encourage the public to report incidents of crime to the authorities.

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